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PETER HSU

THE GAUNTLET™

A Adults Only

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Gauntlet

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CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

THE ORNOST MOUNTAINS...

OUR **EASTERN FLANKS** HAVE **COLLAPSED!**

I'LL **HOLD** THEM OFF, JEMMA... GO AND **WARN KING REDHAWK...**

NO... I **CAN'T** LEAVE YOU!

THERE'S **TOO MANY** OF THEM...

WE ARE **DEAD!** SAVE **YOURSELF...**

CAPTAIN URON!!

IT'S WORKING! THEY **FEAR** ME...

OF COURSE, MY DEAR SEBRONIA! THE SKULKERS ARE IN **AWE OF YOUR POWER...** AND PERHAPS, EVEN OF YOUR **GREAT BEAUTY...**

STAY **BACK!**

...OR FACE THE **POWER** OF MY **METAL GAUNTLET...**

YOU SEE, THESE **ONCE IGNORANT BRUTES** HAVE COME QUITE **PERCEPTIVE.....**

...WH-WHO...

...THANKS IN NO SMALL MEASURE TO **ME...**

DARKOS! HOW DID YOU KNOW MY NAME??

OH, YES... THE **SKULKERS** WERE HUNTED LIKE **ANIMALS** ONCE...

...AND BEING **DEFENSE-LESS** AGAINST SOPHISTI-CATED HUMAN WEAPONRY AND WAR TACTICS, BECAME **VICTIMS OF A GENOCIDAL CAMPAIGN...**

SO I **SAID** TO THEM ONE DAY: **GO FORTH AND FACE YOUR TORMEN-TORS... AS EQUALS!**

A **NOBLE ACT,** I WOULD SAY! WHY, I MIGHT EVEN RISK **ADMONISHMENT** FROM THE **EVIL ONES...**

YOU **LIE!** YOU'RE TRYING TO **JUSTIFY** THIS **BLOODBATH** OF SKULKERS AND HUMANS...

— AND **I MUST SAY,** YOU'VE BECOME QUITE **ADEPT** AT IT **YOURSELF...**

JEMMA, THE **SERVING MAID...** INDEED!

I **BELONG** WITH THE HUMANS! I **FIGHT** FOR REDHAWK... **NOTHING** WILL CHANGE THAT!!

...TUT TUT, SEBRONIA! YOU KNOW **WELL** HUMANS ARE **UNSURPASSED** WHEN IT COMES TO **LYING...**

....AH, WHAT IF I WERE TO **WHISPER** TO YOUR **DEAR KING...** THE **TRUTH...** THEN WHAT WOULD **HE** SAY?

YOU **WOULDN'T DARE...**

I'LL **KILL** YOU WHERE YOU STAND....

I HAVE THE **POWER**....

...GO **AHEAD**....

...PROVE TO ME HOW **EXQUISITELY HUMAN** YOU'VE **BECOME**...

I... I CAN'T! **I CAN'T DO IT!!**

MY GAUNTLET HAS FAILED ME... AND YOU KNEW THIS... WHO ARE YOU, DARKOS?

I AM **CRUSHED** THAT YOU DO NOT REMEMBER, SEBRONIA! I AM YOUR **GODFATHER,** OF COURSE!

KADIVARUS, WHO RAISED YOU AS DAUGHTER, HAD ME AS **GUEST** AT YOUR **BAPTISMALS** TO THE **EVIL TABARROK** WHEN YOU WERE A **YEAR** OLD!

AND WHEN YOU **FIRST** DONNED THE **METAL GAUNTLET,** I STOOD IN THE **SHADOWS,** GLOWING WITH **PRIDE**...

NOW THAT KADIVARUS IS **DEAD,** I FEEL **RESPONSIBLE** FOR YOUR WELL-BEING..

...FOR WE ARE OF KIN!!

NEVER! I COULD **NEVER** BE ONE OF YOU!! I'D **RATHER DIE**...

I'LL TELL REDHAWK THE **TRUTH!** HE'LL **UNDERSTAND... AND FORGIVE!** SOME HUMANS... **DO** HAVE **COMPASSION...!**

THEN GO! **TELL** THE **BLOODY FOOL**...

GASP! WHAT ARE YOU **DOING?**

...BUT BE SURE TO **LOOK THE PART**...

...AND **DON'T FORGET** TO **BRING** ALONG YOUR **LITTLE ENTOURAGE...** SEBRONIA, DAUGHTER OF **KADIVARUS,** DAUGHTER OF **DEATH!!**

NO!

NO! EEEE

EARS

WHAT'S THE **MATTER?** DO YOUR **FRIENDS OFFEND YOU?**

THEY WERE YOUR **PLAYMATES** ONCE!!

GASP! I CAN'T LET REDHAWK **SEE** ME LIKE THIS...

LET ME **GO... EEEH!**

RUN.... **RUN,** LITTLE GAUNTLET...

...YOU'LL **COME BACK** TO ME...

...HA, HA HAAH!!

I WAS LUCKY! IGROS'S BLOW ONLY GRAZED ME ----

STILL ALIVE, ELF-WARRIOR?

IT MATTERS NOT! YOU CANNOT ESCAPE ME NOW --- FOR BEHIND YOU IS A CAVERNOUS WALL...

I WILL INCREASE MY SMOULDERING INTENSITY THUS... SO YOUR DEATH WILL BE QUICK AND MERCIFUL!

SSSSS!

YOU'RE A FOOL, IGROS! YOUR SIZE DIMINISHES WITH EVERY USE OF POWER! OR HAVEN'T YOU NOTICED?

IGROS! YOU DO NOT BURN WITH **DARKOS' MAGIC...** BUT **FUEL** FROM YOUR **OWN BODY!**

CLIMBING THE WALL WON'T **SAVE** YOU...

LIES! YOU SEEK TO *CONFUSE* ME WITH YOUR *PRATTERING!* MY *FAITH* IN DARKOS IS *UNSHAKE-ABLE!*

PSST

EVERYTHING BURNS AT MY TOUCH, STORMCREST...

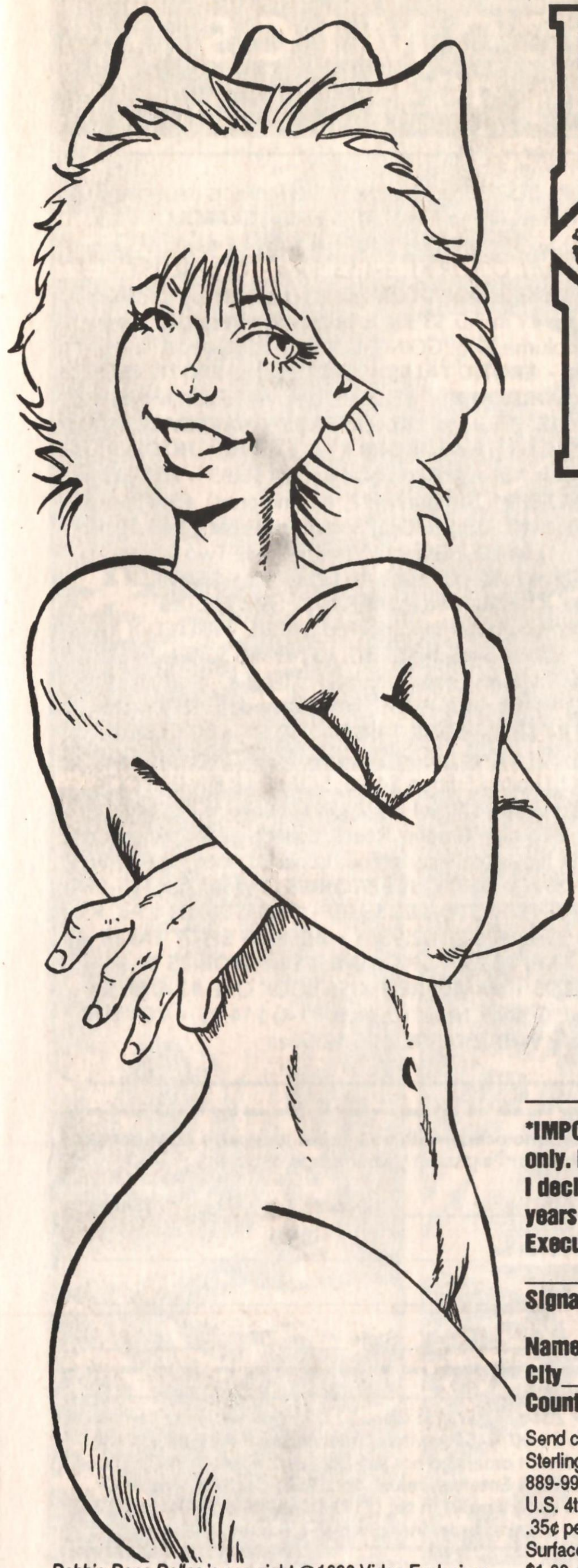
...EVEN **GRANITE WALLS!!**

AAH! THE WALL **EXPLODED** FROM THE HEAT...

SLABS OF ROCK SLID **DOWNWARDS...**

BY TABARROK! NO!

THE ROCKSLIDE **BURIED** IGROS... BUT IS IT ENOUGH TO **KILL** HIM?



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SIZZLE

OH... NO! THE ROCKS ARE STARTING TO **BOIL AWAY...**

HE'S STILL **ALIVE!!**

DAMNED... MY **FOOT...**

IT'S **CAUGHT!** HAVE TO... **WORK IT LOOSE....**

SSSSS

SSS

SPLISH!

AARGH!

BY THE BEARD OF TABARROK! **HOW** THE HUMANS AND SKULKERS **HATE** EACH OTHER... A HATE THAT **BURNS** SO HOT IT **FUSES** THEIR BODIES TOGETHER....

IS THIS A WORLD I WOULD **WANT** TO LIVE IN?

IS IT **BETTER** THAN THAT OF **INCARNATUS?**

WAIT!...

SIGNS OF **LIFE!** COMBAT STILL **RAGES!**

I MUST **HELP** PRINCE REDHAWK! **NENA** WOULD HAVE WANTED IT SO...

PRINCE **REDHAWK?**

I **SLAUGHTERED** THEM BY THE HUNDREDS... BUT **STILL** THEY CAME!

VICTORY, WHICH SHOULD BE MINE, HAS BEEN **WRESTED** FROM ME....

...IS IT FROM THE **LACK** OF RIGHTEOUSNESS OF MY CAUSE? NO!

... A **FAILURE** OF COURAGE OR **WEAKNESS** IN STEEL? **NO!!**

I ASK YOU, JURY OF ROTTING CORPSES.... IS THE ONE THEY CALL THE **GAUNTLET** GUILTY? DID SHE TURN MY HOUR OF TRIUMPH INTO DECAYING MORASS? DID SHE....

...STAB ME IN THE BACK?

DON'T **DENY** YOUR **EVIL**... MY **SPIES** HAVE TOLD ALL ABOUT YOU... WHAT YOU **DID** WITH MY FATHER! I ONLY WISH I HAD KILLED YOU **EARLIER!**

URK!

SEBRONIA!

NENA! HELP ME **DESTROY** THIS **EVIL.... WITCH!** I **COMMAND** YOU!!

NENA.! DON'T...

I OWE YOU **NOTHING,** REDHAWK!

MY **CHILDHOOD PROMISES** TO LOVE AND CHERISH YOU ARE HEREBY **DISSOLVED...**

REMEMBER THIS ON YOUR JOURNEY TO **HELL....** THAT NENA FOUND **FAITH** IN HERSELF BEFORE IT WAS TOO LATE!

IT'S ALL **OVER!**

THERE'S NOBODY LEFT **ALIVE....**

...EXCEPT US!

HOW **STRANGE** THE WHOLE THING IS....

I WANTED TO **HELP** YOU AND THE HUMANS, NENA! **INSTEAD,** I'VE **DEPRIVED** YOU OF A **QUEENLY FUTURE...** AND **HELPED DESTROY REDHAWK...**

...PERHAPS I **AM** TRULY EVIL! PERHAPS I **WAS** SENT TO THIS EARTH TO **SOW MISERY AND DESTRUCTION...**

DEAR **SEBRONIA!** OF **ALL** THE HUMANS I'VE **KNOWN**, YOU ARE THE **MOST INNOCENT... MOST NAIVE...**

YOU'RE NOT EVEN **SURE** WHAT **EVIL IS!**

BUT THEN, I **BARELY KNOW** MYSELF, SOMETIMES! HUMANS OFTEN **DO EVIL...** EVEN WHEN THEY INTEND **GOOD!**

REDHAWK WAS A GOOD MAN... **ONCE!** HE WANTED TO **RID** THE EARTH OF EVIL SO BADLY THAT HE **SNUFFED OUT** THE **LIVES OF THOUSANDS...**

...TO THOSE HE CAUSED **SUFFERING,** HE WAS **EVIL!**

AHHH... I AM BEGINNING TO **UNDERSTAND...** THE **NATURE OF EVIL....**

...AND **ABOUT TIME,** TOO!!

OH... **NO!**

I FORGOT... **INCARNATUS!!**

BLOODSHELL

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

TWO SMOULDERING HANDS HAD BURST THROUGH THE TOMB OF RAPIDLY SOLIDIFYING ROCK, **STRUGGLING** TO FREE THE BEING THAT WAS ONCE **IGROS.** BUT THE STRUGGLES GREW **WEAKER...** AND STORMCREST **KNEW...**

...IGROS HAS **BURNED HIMSELF** OUT!!

GOODBYE, IGROS! YOU'VE SERVED YOUR MASTER ONLY **TOO WELL!**

UNH... I'VE **FREED** MY LEG...

QUICKMOON! ORGALITH! CAN YOU **HEAR** ME....?

THE PIT SEEMS **DIFFERENT...**

I DON'T **HEAR** THE OTHERS! THE **POOL** MUST BE **EXTREMELY DEEP....**

UNH! THE WALLS ARE LOSING THEIR **TEXTURE** AND **GRIP!** I'M STARTING TO **SLIP....**

THE PIT IS **DISAPPEARING...**

BY THE **STARS...**

I'VE LOST MY **GRIP!**

...FALLING!

OF COURSE! OUR **ENTRY** INTO THE PIT HAS SOMEHOW NEGATED **DARKOS' BLOODSPELLS!**

AAAH!

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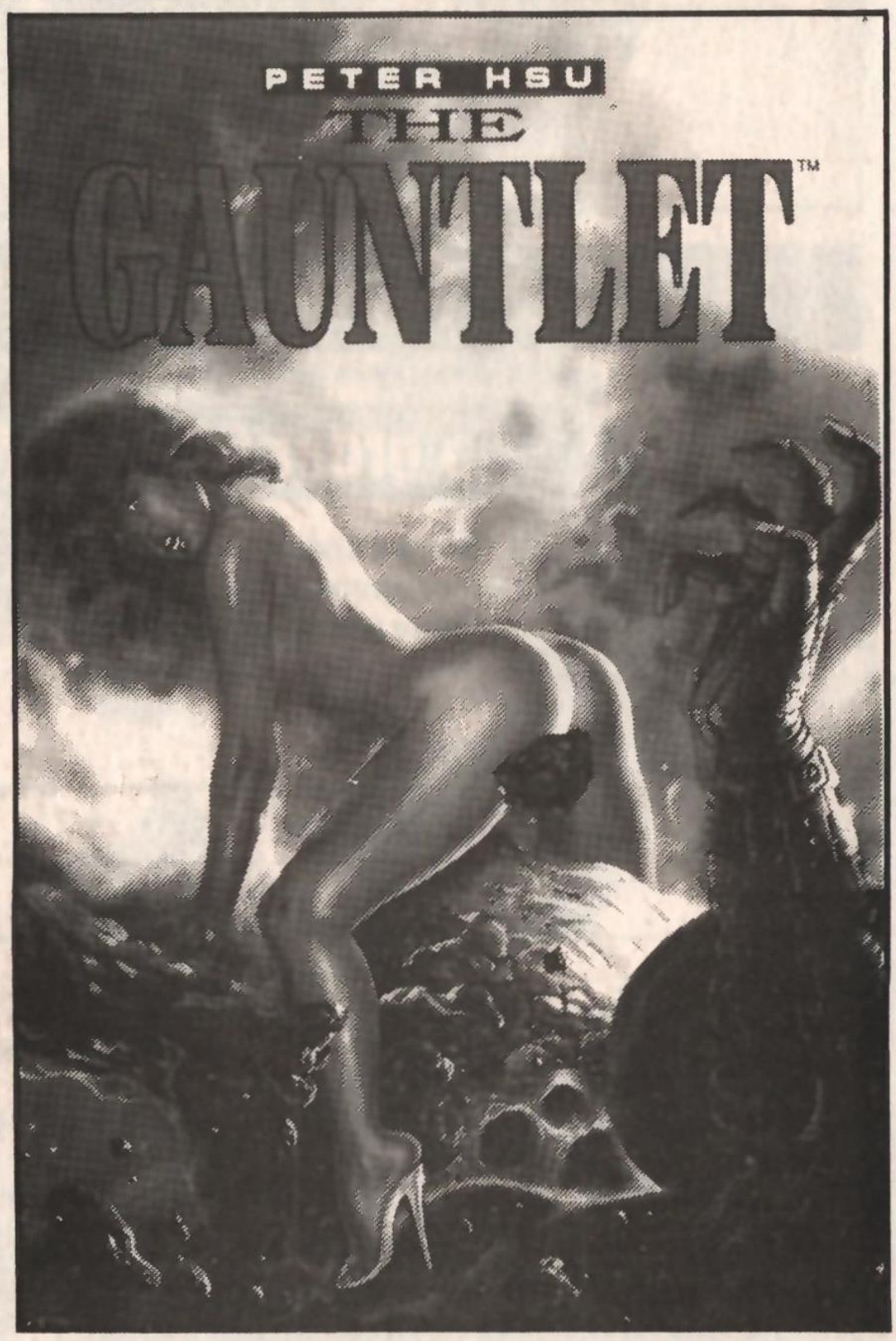

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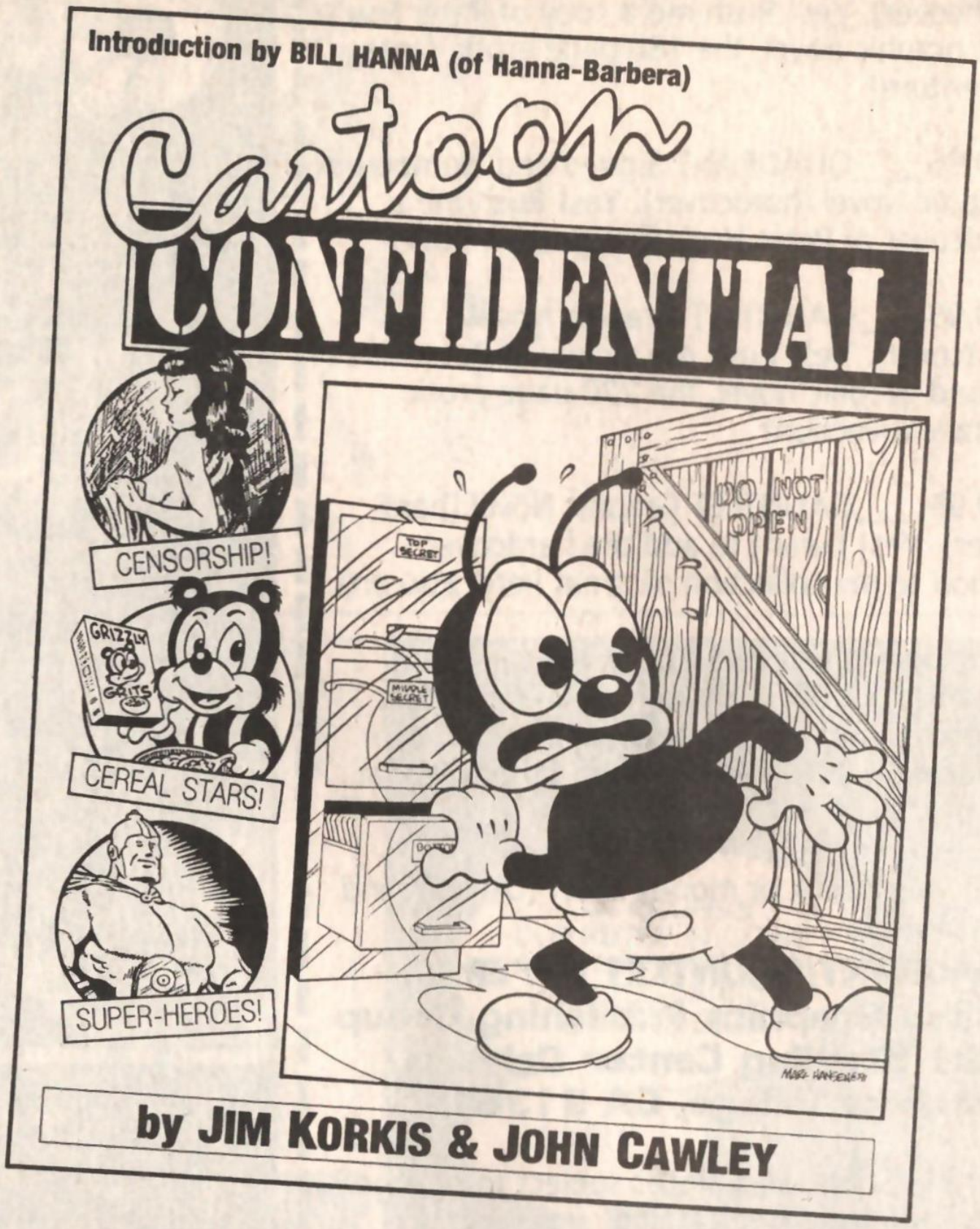

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A **UNIVERSE** PASSED HIM BY, AS IF PROPELLED BY THE FIERY FORCE OF AN **EXPLODING VOLCANO....**

THEN, SUDDENLY...

I SEEM TO HAVE **STOPPED** FALLING...

THE **PIT** FROM WHERE I CAME THROUGH... IT'S A **FEATURELESS DISK OF LIGHT!** A **PORTAL** OF SOME SORT!

I DON'T HAVE THE **MEANS** TO GO BACK **UP!**

ANOTHER PORTAL! BUT **WHERE** DOES IT LEAD?

I HAVE NO **CHOICE** BUT TO ENTER! EITHER THAT OR SLOWLY **STARVE** TO DEATH HERE!

MY **HAND....** IT'S PASSING **THROUGH...**

THIS MUST BE THE HOME OF THE **GODS! INCREDIBLE BEAUTY** EXISTS SIDE BY SIDE WITH THE MOST **GRUESOME UGLINESS...**

STARS SET UPON EACH OTHER LIKE **RAVENOUS WOLVES,** SMASHING THEIR VICTIMS INTO **SHOWERS OF SPARKS...** LEAVING ENTRAILS OF **LIGHT...** OF **POWER!**

IN TURN THE LIGHT BROKE THROUGH THE CORDON OF **DARKNESS,** ONLY TO RECEDE WHEN FRESH **GLOBULES OF BLACK** BURST LIKE AN OILY STAIN, THREATENING TO **ENVELOPE** THEM. WITH EACH **VIOLENT ENCOUNTER,** WAVES OF HEAT SWEPT THROUGH STORMCREST'S HAIR.

IF ONLY HE COULD USE THE POWER, STORM-CREST THOUGHT. LIKE SOME **FARMER** HARNESSING HIS OXEN TO CUT THE EARTH...

IT WAS **THEN** STORM-CREST **UNDERSTOOD** THE **POWER OF DARKOS....**

EH! SNOWSONG **GLOWS...** AS IF TO **POINT** MY WAY....

... AND I MUST FOLLOW **WITHOUT HESITATION!**

BY THE **STARS...**

GASP! STORMCREST!

UNTIE ME QUICK! THE DEMONS WILL BE **BACK** SOON...

...IT'S NENA ... TRUSSED UP LIKE A **PIG** READIED FOR **ROASTING...**

THEN, AT A **SAFE DISTANCE** FROM THE **SACRIFICIAL STONES...**

I NEVER THOUGHT **RESCUE** COULD COME! THEY WERE ABOUT TO HAVE ME FOR DINNER...

HOW DID YOU FIND ME?

BY **PURE CHANCE!** I WAS IN THE **TOWER OF BLADES** ONE MOMENT, AND THEN.... **HERE!**

WHAT OF THE **OTHERS?**

REDHAWK IS **DEAD**, AND HIS ARMY HAS BEEN **DESTROYED!**

NO! THAT **CAN'T** BE TRUE! YOU'RE **LYING....**

BUT **BILBOR** SPOKE OF **VICTORY!**

STORMCREST! I'VE **NOT TOLD** YOU... A GREAT MANY THINGS ABOUT US **HUMANS...** AND ABOUT **REDHAWK!**

WE... **USE OTHER PEOPLE** TO FURTHER OUR OWN AIMS! WE WOULD **LIE...** AND **MANIPULATE...**

...EVEN **RESSURRECT THE LEGEND OF BILBOR...**

WHAT DO YOU **MEAN, NENA? HOW** DO YOU POSSIBLY **KNOW OF BILBOR?**

SOME TIME AGO, WHEN REDHAWK TRIED TO **ENLIST** THE HELP OF KING GILGUR, HE HEARD ABOUT THE **LEGEND OF BILBOR...** AND YOUR **DEVOTION** TO IT!

SINCE GILGUR **TURNED DOWN** HIS OFFER OF AN **ALLIANCE,** HE DECIDED TO FIND ANOTHER WAY TO **ENLIST** THE AID OF THE **ELVEN GUARD!**

...SO HE **BRIBED OLD HORGIA** TO **MESMERIZE** YOU! THAT, TOGETHER WITH YOUR OWN **AMBITIONS,** GAVE **LIFE** TO BILBOR... **OUR** BILBOR! A BILBOR WHO SPOKE OF A **FUTURE** WHICH SERVED **OUR** PURPOSES...

...AND WHAT OF YOU, NENA ? **WHY** DO YOU **TELL** ME THIS...?

I HAVE BEEN MADE A **FOOL!** KING GILGUR WAS **RIGHT** ABOUT HUMANS...

I...

HOW **CONTEMPTABLE** YOU HUMANS ARE... ONLY I AM **MORE SO....**

EEEAH!!

THAT **VOICE...** IT'S **SEBRONIA!**

WHO??

YOU KNEW HER AS **JEMMA!** SHE IS THE **GAUNTLET...**

IT'S COMING FROM THAT **PORTAL!**

LET'S **GO!**

THERE SHE IS! WHO'S THAT CREATURE WITH HER...?

EEEH! HELP ME!!

WHEN MY **SLURPING TONGUE** FINDS ITS MARK... A **UNION** WILL BE FORGED...

... THAT OF A **DEMON** AND HIS **BETROTHED!!**

IT'S ***INCARNATUS!!***

AAAH! CAN'T WE JUST TALK ABOUT THIS?

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